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SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: INTERNEWS RECEIVES POSITIVE SIGNALS ON MEDIA

REFORM

REF: (A) 07 ASHGABAT 1338 (B) 08 ASHGABAT 1547

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11. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public Internet.

12. (SBU) SUMMARY: In meetings on January 22 with the Turkmen National Institute of Democracy and Human Rights (IDHR) and Ministry of Culture and Broadcasting, USAID/Internews received renewed confirmation of these entities' desire for cooperation on media reform. The IDHR repeated its previously stated intention to cooperate with Internews to develop a new mass media law, and proposed a July roundtable as the initial step in a series of events to support the ongoing process of general legislative reform. Separately, the Minister of Culture and Broadcasting indicated his willingness to work with Internews to improve production skills of state television managers and specialists, beginning with a five-day study tour to Kazakhstan for managers of Turkmen television channels. Both of these entities had previously stated a desire for cooperation with USAID/Internews only to have seemingly agreed upon plans scuttled during the interagency process (ref A), but Post remains cautiously optimistic that the current initiatives will move forward. END SUMMARY.

IDHR DIRECTOR: MEDIA LAW DUE FOR CHANGES

13. (SBU) During the meeting with the Institute of Democracy and Human Rights, Institute Director Shirin Ahmedova said that cooperation with USAID and Internews fit within the framework of overall legislative reforms announced by President Berdimuhamedov and his specific mandates to develop mass media in Turkmenistan. The mass media law had not undergone any changes since its adoption in 1991, but there was currently public and governmental demand to

improve the media sector, including legislation related to mass media.

14. (SBU) Ahmedova stressed that Turkmenistan itself had identified positive development initiatives and that international donors should seek opportunities to support these initiatives. She said that USAID proved to be an effective partner for the Institute in building a platform for NGO law changes (ref B), so it was prepared to cooperate with USAID and Internews on the mass media law. Additionally, she complimented Internews for increased government engagement in CIS countries, specifically Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, which positively affected the IDHR's desire to cooperate with Internews. To this end, she said that Turkmenistan's government had already announced its intention to cooperate with USAID/Internews on mass media law when its delegation appeared before the United Nations' Human Rights Council as part of the Universal Periodical Review mechanism. (NOTE: Ahmedova herself made this statement in December 2008 as the government's representative in Geneva. END NOTE)

15. (SBU) As a first step in its cooperation with USAID/Internews, Ahmedova proposed to organize a joint roundtable in July 2009 on international standards in mass media legislation with participation of the international specialists identified by Internews. A second roundtable, for participants from the different government agencies such as Parliament, Ministry of Culture, Institute of State and Law and others, would discuss Internews' recommendations on the mass media law changes. Finally, IDHR and Internews' experts would jointly prepare practical recommendations to amend the existing mass media law, which would be submitted to Parliament for consideration. (NOTE: This approach is similar to earlier cooperation between IDHR and USAID/ICNL on the law on NGOs. END NOTE)

"THE FIRST STEP IS THE HARDEST -- LET'S GET STARTED"

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16. (SBU) Minister of Culture and Broadcasting Gulmurat Muradov said the government was very interested to upgrade the quality of Turkmenistan's television specialists and content. Although it was launched only recently, the Ministry had positive expectations for its new television channel, Turkmen Ovasy (Turkmen Melody). Acknowledging its ongoing cooperation with other international donors, including BBC World Trust, Muradov said that the Ministry was interested to cooperate with USAID/Internews on capacity-building efforts through training TV journalists, managers, camera men and other specialists. The Ministry had young and capable specialists, but they lacked good professional skills and did not have the creativity to support national development objectives. Stressing the need for local knowledge and understanding, the Minister mentioned a visiting foreign producer and cameraman who did not know the country's specifics, whose outputs could not be broadcast by state TV as a result.

17. (SBU) Addressing Muradov's interest in professional training, Internews' Regional Director provided several examples of its experience training specialists and providing consultations in all media-related areas, from producing video segments to drafting legislation. Furthermore, its extensive experience working in Central Asia provided it with detailed knowledge on each country's specific needs. In this regard, Internews noted that it has highly qualified trainers in Kazakhstan and other Central Asian countries that could support the professional development needs of the Ministry's specialists. Internews was fully prepared to respond to the Minister's concerns.

18. (SBU) After the Ministry's International Department Head explained that the study tour Internews proposed in mid-November had not been possible due to the high number of festivals and state visits during that time, Muradov sighed, "The first step is the hardest. Let's get started." The Ministry and Internews agreed that Internews would propose new dates for a five-day study tour to Kazakhstan for Turkmenistan's television channel managers, then would develop a more detailed proposal to provide in-country training for state TV staff based on the study tour's results. In addition, the Ministry would consider the possibility of sending

selected technical staff to Kazakhstan for extended training. Finally, Muradov appeared very interested in Internews' offer to provide Internews-produced content for airing on state TV channels, and requested copies to review.

¶9. (SBU) COMMENT: Although both the IDHR and Ministry have previously stated a desire for cooperation with USAID/Internews, only to have seemingly agreed upon plans scuttled during the interagency process, the fact that both entities proposed firm activities and continued to express a willingness to cooperate may indicate that previous obstacles have been addressed. Post remains cautiously optimistic that the current agreements will move forward following their submission through official channels.

¶10. (SBU) COMMENT CONTINUED: Both the IDHR Director and the Minister of Culture and Broadcasting raised the issue of TV channels' privatization when discussing international experience. The minister mentioned his interest in Kazakhstan's experience transitioning government channels to private ownership and said that both he and the Ministry's TV station managers would closely study Internews' experience in developing charters and regulations with Kazakhstan's private channels. Some local experts have suggested that opening a private station may become possible within the next two years, although it is likely that anyone allowed to do so will be scrutinized closely for loyalty to the administration and willingness to toe the party line. END COMMENT.

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